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ABSTRACT

The problem of adult illiteracy in Canada is now accepted as socially significant, whether defined in terms of numbers, impact on the economy, or implications for the future. A reasonable estimate would be that one in five Canadian adults has a severe enough problem with reading, writing, or arithmetic that his or her functioning in society is to some degree impaired. Some misgivings have arisen about present treatments of the illiteracy problem: financial resources have not been equitably available to adult basic education and literacy training, major resources have been dedicated to the upper end of the educational spectrum, and there does not seem to be a consistent philosophy for curriculum or program development or for instruction of adults at the literacy level. These perceptions of needs lead to the argument that the development of more effective literacy training programs and delivery systems must start with the needs and preferences of the students, addressed innovatively. Future programs should take into account the functional, the personal, and the cultural/social reasons for attendance in training, and they should attempt to provide learning opportunities in all of these areas for those who wish them. Finally, effective programs must respect the fact that the learners are adults and therefore must provide choices and be extremely flexible in terms of pace and location of training; in other words, they should treat students as "customers." (KC)

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ADULT BASIC EDUCATION IN ALBERTA: TO AND BEYOND 1990

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BACKGROUND

In a survey conducted in early 1989, 56% of respondents identified adult illiteracy as the most pressing social issue, second only to impaired driving (Community Programs Branch, Alberta Advanced Education, 1989). As the UNESCO International Year of Literacy approaches, more and more attention will be focused on the problem. One result which has already been seen is that for the first time in my 18 years in adult education it is possible for me to mention the problem of adult illiteracy and not have to explain the term in detail first.

In this paper I will present some of the evidence which I believe has influenced public opinion about the magnitude and significance of adult illiteracy, both in Canada and in the Province of Alberta. I will also summarize some of the steps which have been taken to deal with the problem in Alberta. Finally, I want to give some of my predictions about what will have to be done in the future to make a meaningful impact on the problem.

DEFINING ADULT (IL)LITERACY

Traditional Definitions

Definitions of illiteracy can usually be fitted into one of five epistemological categories.

1. Statistical: Grade 9 or greater level of formal education (Statistics Canada).

2. Sociological: "Rather than an end in itself, literacy should be regarded as a way of preparing man for a social, civic and economic role that goes far beyond the limits of rudimentary literacy training consisting merely in the teaching of reading and writing." (The World Congress On The Eradication Of Illiteracy, 1965)

3. Individual - Personal: "[Literacy is] the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing." (Hunter and Harman, 1979)

4. Functional: "If people are in fact coping with their lives without literacy, can they be judged to be functionally incompetent and therefore in need of education? On this basis, the only working definition of an adult sub-literate seems to be "one who knows he is". It is the perception of his inadequacy, attested by his willingness to seek tuition, that includes him in this category." (Jones and Charnley, 1978)

5. Employment-Related: "(Core Skill) training must cover the ability to read, write and understand complex material, to communicate in one's mother tongue, to know a certain level of mathematics and computer science, how society and the world work, and to learn how to learn. As well we must give people the skills needed to work with a team, lead where appropriate, innovate, adapt to change." (Consultation Paper on Training, Government of Canada, 1984).

Each of these definitions has its own philosophical orientation, and, therefore, its own strengths and weaknesses. For example, the statistical definition obviously overlooks the fact that some very highly educated people in (terms of formal education) are barely functionally literate, and vice versa. Similarly, the social and individual - personal definitions place major emphasis upon the individual's own determination of his needs, and undervalue the social responsibility of the individual who has received the benefit of the education. The functional outlook tends to be tied to a particular purpose, and often lacks

an educational element in favour of the training emphasis. Finally, an employment-related focus is a special case of a functional orientation but taken to extreme.

A Canadian effort at definition

In Canada, a major study of the phenomenon of adult illiteracy was conducted by the Southam Press in 1987. In this study, Southam employed a "blended" definition of illiteracy, combining useful elements from the five philosophical traditions mentioned above. The study was based on 2,398 individual interviews conducted in 148 communities across Canada. Three samples were chosen from the adult Canadian population: a random cross-section of the population; extra samples from some cities and regions; and a special "over sample" of 21 - 25 years olds, (Southam, 1987, p. 7)

One of the interesting features of the Southam study which should be mentioned involves the groups which were excluded: those under 18 years of age; those residing north of the 60th parallel; transients; members of the armed forces; natives on reserves; and the institutionalized, including inmates. What is remarkable about these exclusions (as charged by critics of the study; see Fagan, 1988) is that these groups are likely to include large proportions of those who might be expected to test at the lower ends of the literacy spectrum. However, problems of sampling and control of the study precluded their inclusion, according to the Southam researchers.

The method used in the Southam study was an interview conducted with each participant in which backgrounds, including previous education and work history, were obtained. Participants'

questions about the study were answered, then tests of reading, writing and number skills, using 60 items based on "everyday life", were administered. A panel of 25 members of high standing in the arts and cultural community had been consulted in setting the standard for basic literacy incorporated in the tests.

Here were some of the findings of the Southam study.

WHAT CANADIANS COULDN'T DO:

	Incorrect
Circle expiry date on driver's licence	6%
Read cough syrup instructions	10%
Sign social insurance card	11%
Circle correct traffic sign	13%
Circle charge on telephone bill	29%
Find a store in the Yellow Pages	50%
Find amount on income tax table	70%

(p. 14)

THE GENDER GAP:

Who got the most right	Males	Females
Read cough syrup instructions	87%	92%
Fill out dollar amount on cheque	75%	80%
Follow route on city map	68%	62%
Summarize article on business words	45%	50%
Understand Charter of Rights	38%	41%
Find amount on income tax table	33%	27%

(p. 30)

The study also found that illiteracy rates were higher in the East: the national average was 24%, but the average in Newfoundland was 44%, in the Maritimes 25%, in Quebec 28%; in British Columbia 17%, Saskatchewan/Manitoba 19%, and Alberta 21%.

Finally, the Southam study determined (gratefully) that education had some impact on illiteracy, but that fully 8% of University graduates tested illiterate, 11% of Community College and Trade School graduates did, and 17% of those claiming high school graduation were illiterate according to the survey.

Additional conclusions were:

Illiteracy was higher among Francophones, especially older

ones. (No difference was found between younger Francophones and younger Anglophones.)

Half of the 4.5 million estimated Canadian adult illiterates were 55 years of age or older.

Children of the jobless, the working class, and the poorly educated were much more likely to test illiterate (p. 16).

Summary. With differing philosophical orientations to the problem of illiteracy, and testing and survey methods which leave some doubt as to their validity, estimates of the scope of the problem of adult illiteracy are hard to confirm. The following are some estimates which have been made since 1982 by groups closely involved with the problem.

- Movement for Canadian Literacy, (1982): One-quarter to one-third of the adult population of developed countries is probably illiterate (lacks at least a grade 9 functional education).

- Southam Survey, (1987): estimates 5 million adult illiterates in Canada, approximately 24% of the adult population.

- National Literacy Secretariat, Canada (1989): categorizes illiterates as "basically illiterate" (8%), "functionally illiterate" (16%), "marginally literate" (9%), and 1 in 6 working Canadians illiterate.

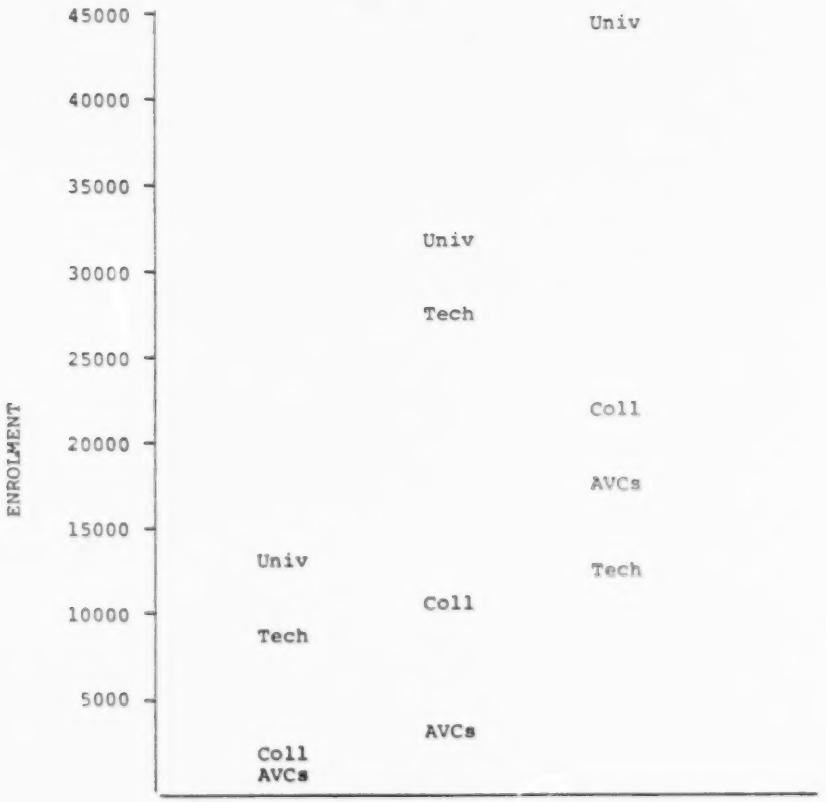
Even if the most conservative of these estimates is correct, at least 17% of adult Canadians have a serious enough problem with reading and writing that their employment and/or social functioning is impaired. In a worst case, the impairment is sufficient enough to make the individual a hazard to himself and his co-workers, and a "carrier" of the social and educational problems of illiteracy to the next generation.

TREATING THE PROBLEM

The literacy mandate in Alberta

In the Province of Alberta, the responsibility for providing basic literacy training to adults rests primarily with the Alberta Vocational Centres, although all the community colleges in the province also offer some sort of programming at this level, either institutional or volunteer-based. As shown below, the enrollment growth in the Vocational Centres from 1965 - 1988 was the greatest of all sectors of the post-secondary system in the Province.

ALBERTA POST-SECONDARY ENROLMENT GROWTH



	1965	1977	1988	Increase, '65-'88
Population:	1.4M	2.2M	2.4M	
Universities:	13500	31000	44000	326%
Colleges:	550	10000	21500	3909%
Techical Inst:	9000	27000	12000	133%
AVCs:	250	2700	17000	6800%

It would appear, then, that the responsibility for basic literacy instruction has been met in this Province. A closer look at the expenditures in the various levels of the post-secondary system reveal some interesting discrepencies, however. First, out of a total Department of Advanced Education budget (1989) of approximately one billion dollars, 45 million (4.5%) was actually allocated to literacy, and a portion of this was allocated outside of the Alberta Vocational Centres to volunteer-based and Further Education Council-based programs. Within the Alberta Vocational Centres, recent statistics (1988-89 academic year) indicated only 2% of enrollments were at the 0 - 4 grade level, and only an additional 8% at the 5 - 6 level. In total, 21% of enrollments in academic upgrading were below the grade 9 level.

In devoting 79% of their resources to students functioning at grades 9 and above, the Alberta Vocational Centres joined at least 7 other institutions or agencies in the Province in providing services to a functionally literate population. At the same time, only the AVC's, the continuing education programs of the public school boards, and various volunteer-based programs provided programming at the basic literacy level. This seems to be a case of the educationally rich getting richer.

Clarity of mission in literacy programming

In addition to mis-allocation of resources to the upper end of the academic spectrum, there has been a record of some confusion in the programming itself. The following is an extract from Alberta Vocational Centre Edmonton's Institutional Development Plan (1988 update), in which the ambitions of the upgrading program to emulate the public schools and the Department

of Education curriculum are articulated:

> Department of Education curriculum and examination policies have had and will have a serious effect on academic upgrading's delivery system. The introduction of diploma examinations has reduced the flexibility of module offerings as well as the latitude of academic upgrading's annual program mix. The Department of Education's plans to introduce major revisions in the sciences, social sciences and mathematics courses pose problems for our students and our existing schedule of courses (p. 31).

Summary. In Alberta, the responsibility for basic literacy has been assigned to the Alberta Vocational Centres, or has become a responsibility of academic upgrading programs in the community colleges. Tremendous increases in enrollment in the Vocational Centres attest to the popularity of their programs; however, an examination of enrollment patterns indicates that the vast majority of that growth is at levels above grade 8 (i.e., beyond basic literacy). Programming conducted by volunteers, and by other segments of the post secondary system, suffers from a lack of systematic evaluation and program development. Simplistic standards are all that are available to observers who wish to evaluate the amount of attention being paid to literacy in the province, and by that standard less than one dollar in twenty spent on advanced education is spent on individuals who presumably need it most.

THE FUTURE.

Criteria for change

Any attempt to address the problem of adult illiteracy must take into account the motivations of learners, and what is known about effective programming at any point of the academic spectrum.

It should also take into account advice of observers such as Tom Peters, who in his In Search of Excellence noted that the two keys to excellence in the corporate world are 1) listening to the customer, and 2) innovation. In this concluding section of my presentation I would like to apply Mr. Peters' advice to the problem of adult illiteracy as it might be addressed in Alberta.

What the customers want

If adult educators listen to their customers, they'll find that the motivations for learning include the following: 1) to enhance employment or further training prospects; 2) to provide social interaction; and 3) to satisfy a love of learning.

Given this variety, basic literacy programming must be capable of addressing the several reasons the learners may have for entering into it. Programming which is strictly employment-related will miss the other two goals, and will alienate people whose motives are not that simplistic. Similarly, programming which fails to provide for some employment or further training capability will short-change persons with those goals.

Another source of information about the wishes and plans of learners comes from the excellent 1982 study conducted by the Canadian Association for Adult Education, From the Adult's Point of View. In this study a number of interesting findings were made:

1. Individuals who already had high levels of previous education were far more likely to continue to be learners as adults. In a typical group of adult learners in this survey, 57% had a University degree, 59% were College graduates, and 25% had graduated from High School. Only 11% of the adult learner group had less than a high school diploma.

2. The better off an individual is financially, the more likely he or she is to undertake an adult learning program. The CAAE found that 48% of learners were in the upper quarter of income, 39% were in the third quarter. Only 17% of learners came from the lowest income quartile.

3. Active learners were more likely to live in urban centres of 100,000 population or more.

4. Employed persons were twice as likely to be learners as unemployed.

5. Union members were more likely to be learners than non-union workers.

6. Persons under 44 years of age, (and particularly those under 24) were most likely to be learners.

When asked their reasons for taking a course, respondents in the CAAE study gave the following:

Reasons For Taking a Course:

Reason	%
1. Increase income, improve employment	56%
2. Personal development, growth, enjoyment	55%
3. Acquire skills to provide for family	38%
4. Improve self expression, communication	24%
5. Improve artistic or crafts abilities	16%

In Britain, a study by Jones and Charnley (1979) determined the psychological and affective payoffs desired by learners:

1. Personal Achievements - feeling of ease within self, improve self-reliance, improved self-assurance, less anxiety.

2. Social Achievements - better ability to express oneself, better relationships with others, better family relationships, better parenting relationships.

Barriers

A great service performed by the CAAE in the 1982 survey was identification of barriers experienced by learners as they attempted to further their education or training. The following is a partial list of the major barriers mentioned in that study:

1. Finances
2. Lack of coordination: "Education and referral agencies tend not to be aware of each other's activities and do not coordinate activities" (p. 11)
3. Lack of support systems
4. Lack of information
5. Geographic barriers
6. Institutional practices: "Institutions tend to offer courses rather than assess and respond to the various learning needs of adults" (p. 11)
7. Fatigue
8. Lack of time
9. Attitudinal barriers: "Adults who have negative or little experience in education feel uneasy about learning within institutions" (p. 12)
10. Fees and other costs
11. Scheduling
12. Curriculum and learning needs: "Adults with negative or little experience in education have different backgrounds from adults with substantial basic education, but they often find the curriculum organized with this latter group in mind" (p. 12).

Finally, in an attempt to listen to our own customers, AVC Edmonton conducted a study in 1985 to determine what problems caused students the most grief. The following were our findings:

1. Course content covered too quickly
2. Too much homework
3. The daily schedule (ending too late, starting too early)

CONCLUSIONS

The problem of adult illiteracy in Canada is now accepted as socially significant, whether defined in terms of numbers, impact on the economy, or implications for the future. Information is increasing from both government and private sources about the problem of adult illiteracy, both as it is experienced by the victim, and as it is sensed by society as a whole. A reasonable estimate would be that 1 in 5 Canadian adults has a severe enough problem with reading, writing, or arithmetic that his or her functioning in society (as a worker, parent, or citizen - or simply as a confident adult) is to some degree impaired. While

only a small fraction of this number has no literacy skills, the functional level of many is such that further training and self-help are made more difficult, or become impossible.

Recently, as official and public attention have been drawn to the problem, it has become possible to judge how effective present solutions have been. Some misgivings have arisen: financial resources have not been equitably available to literacy programs, as compared with other levels of adult education and training systems; and within institutions dedicated to adult basic education and literacy training, major resources have been dedicated to the upper end of the educational spectrum, despite the availability of competing sources of upgrading at those levels. Overall, there does not seem to be a consistent philosophy for curriculum or program development, or for instruction of adults at the literacy level; rather, public school and youth-oriented standards have (apparently uncritically) been embraced.

These perceptions have led me to argue that the starting point for the development of more effective literacy training programs and delivery systems must be the needs and preferences of the students themselves, addressed innovatively. When the learners themselves are consulted, their reasons for returning to education as adults often include a mix of employment, social and personal elements. In addition, there are often specific personal skills learners expect to acquire, usually in relation to their wish to function as comfortable and effective adults in their own communities. In future, therefore, I believe programs must begin to take into account the functional, the personal, and the

cultural/social reasons for attendance in training, and should attempt to provide learning opportunities in all of these areas for those who wish them.

Finally, any effective program attempting to address the problem of adult illiteracy must respect the fact that the learners are in fact adults. As such, the program must provide choices, and must be extremely flexible in terms of pace and location of training. I have referred elsewhere to this as treating students as customers (Fahy, 1987). I think that metaphor is apt, and I hope and expect that such an outlook will increasingly animate adult literacy programs in the Year of Literacy, and beyond.

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